

Identity politics and its discontents | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi October 17, 2022

The fixation around 'lived experiences' today, is in many ways, a form of egotism

the writer is a research fellow at the pakistan institute of development economics he tweets [abbasmoosvi](#)

The writer is a Research Fellow at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. He tweets [@AbbasMoosvi](#)

Progressives, not just in Pakistan but around the world, face a critical juncture: in which they must collectively decide what their strategic orientation towards politics is going to be. As things stand, the 'Left' is characterised by excessive factionalism and a myopic, one-upmanship approach that leaves it stretched too thin – chasing moving targets, too many of which represent mere symptoms rather than the underlying societal disease. One of the primary reasons for this is the emergence and consolidation of 'postmodern' philosophy, which has brought identity politics front and centre of the larger movement: a largely counterproductive development.

Identity politics is, in essence, fragmentary. By adopting a mode of analysis that operates under the assumption that various 'groupings' face struggles that are fundamentally unique and, in some ways, special, the inevitable consequence is a political project fuelled by a pathological kind of tribalism. These essentialised categories, which imply internal homogeneity, function to infantilise individuals – reducing them to the product of historical trajectories rather than as autonomous agents that can act, think, and dream in an independent capacity.

There is an element of irony to this process too, as the ideological backdrop of postmodernism that colours this approach to politics also tends to emphasise the central nature of 'social construction' – that race, creed, gender, sexuality, etc are all defined and granted meaning in a top-down manner by those occupying positions of power rather than being 'set in stone'. This internal inconsistency can never allow for a sustainable social movement to emerge among progressives.

At a broader level, postmodern thought is animated by irony, cynicism and irreverence – an almost flippant attitude towards virtually all overarching ideas associated with 'modernism', including rationality, empiricism, individualism, liberty, progress, etc. Part of this is the rejection of overarching meta-narratives that claim to explain the movement of history: perspectives that are dismissed on hand due to their purportedly 'reductionist' tendencies. In their stead, an ideology of 'deconstruction' is embraced – which seeks to problematise popular conceptions by identifying their inherent biases, the result of power relations. Unfortunately, no concerted alternative – in terms of specific policies, institutional arrangements, and approaches to governance – is presented, meaning an exclusively 'negative' orientation that seeks to tear down (mostly in a justified manner) and rarely, if ever,

build back up.

Electoral democracies are structured in such a way that political success is primarily contingent upon the extent to which various positions can be consolidated in a manner that allows for a united front to ultimately emerge, which the vast majority can rally behind. For modern day progressives, this is becoming an increasingly difficult hurdle due to the various identity groups that are constantly competing with one another as they adopt an increasingly atomised approach to politics that revolves around status/virtue signalling rather than a collective push to improve material conditions.

The general retort to the above is ‘intersectionality’ – the idea that the struggles of seemingly disparate groupings are, in fact, intertwined: overlapping with one another and frequently caused by the same, or similar, factors. This, it is claimed, allows for a gradual unification. The shortcoming here, however, is that it does not specify precisely how such diverse experiences can actually come together in practice. One social movement that is generally considered successful in contemporary times is Occupy Wall Street – in which the most popular slogan was ‘We are the 99%’ whereby a clear demarcation was drawn between the ultra-elite, propertied class on the one hand and everybody else on the other.

This naturally functioned as a unifying call and brought diverse forces under one umbrella, allowing for momentum to build. Even political giants, such as Martin Luther King Jr, who were primarily interested in redressing racial tensions, did not emphasise ‘differences’ between Blacks and Whites in an effort to generate polemical identities but highlighted commonalities by appealing to larger values: liberty, collective growth/evolution, and a sense of responsibility to the community.

The fixation around ‘lived experiences’ today, in which power is perceived to be embedded in day-to-day, moment-to-moment affairs – particularly interpersonal interactions – is, in many ways, a form of egotism. This ‘brand’ of politics functions to locate the source of societal problems at the level of the individual, in terms of the psychological/cultural axioms that orient micro behaviour, rather than at the broader structural/institutional arrangements that give shape to said axioms. In this way, it unites with right-wing approaches that centre ‘individual responsibility’ and strict adherence to a ‘moral code’ (whether that be ‘humanism’ in the case of secular liberals or religion in the case of traditional conservatives) in their political modus operandi.

For big multinational corporations, all this works out fairly well. If politics is essentially the process of subscribing to a set of symbols linked to identity-based social justice, entire industries can now be built from the ground up to cater to that ‘demand’. It is thus no different from sport, in which the various teams have their own logos, badges, designs, colour palettes, etc – marketing them to their respective fan bases. This is not to mention the incentive structures of digital/social media, an increasingly important political battleground, which are designed to keep users hooked, allow for data collection (surveillance), and promote sales via advertisements tailored to their specific activities/interests.

The idea of ‘resistance’ is thus transformed into yet another consumable item: co-opted by the economic superstructure. Indeed, one of Capitalism’s defining traits is its subjugation of all social relations to the flow of capital: meaning that over time, identity-based frictions have grown weaker and gradually replaced by class-based ones in tandem with rising inequalities around the globe. To pretend otherwise is

simply poor political strategy: one which functions to not only prevent the possibility of large-scale amalgamation against a system rigged in favour of elites, but also to trigger reactionary backlash – in which ordinary people, by virtue of being born into an identity deemed ‘privileged’, are made to feel like the enemy, naturally prompting them to join oppositional forces.

Organisational discipline must be revived within progressive circles if a legitimate alternative to populism is to be imagined: this will involve centring the concerns of the working class and ironing out the ideological framework in a manner that is clear, simple, relatable and effective. None of this will be easy: but politics is, after all, the art of the impossible.

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